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Actors Help Spread Western Views in Laos

By JACK LANGGUTH
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VIENTIANE, Laos, Aug. 3— Almost every night in Laos, a demure young woman stands before an audience of villagers and their children and addresses them in off-color language.

She is an employe of the United States Government. Together with her colleagues in the Mohlam she is considered here to be one of the master conveyors of Western propaganda.

The three-member Mohlam troupes date back generations in Laos. One man plays the khene, a mouth instrument that looks like a harmonica with a three-foot chimney.

Before him stands a mischievous-looking man and a shy woman. In the quavering tones of a religious chant they revile each other with the ageless complaints of one sex against the other.

Quick Wit Essential

The fast pace, near calypso in its beat, requires quick wit. Various Mohlam teams are ranked by their ability to answer their partners cleverly and bawdily.

"Sure it is off-color," one United States official said. "But that is the way it has always been." In 1957 an anonymous American in the United States Information Service got the idea of putting the Mohlam to work against the Communists.

The United States now employs four Mohlam teams, paying each team \$550 a month in return for 15 performances in the neutralist villages of Laos.

The content of their acts has been only slightly altered. There is still abusive banter, folk tales and a brief summary of the week's news. The Moh-

Troupes Mix Anti-Communist Warnings With Banter

lam are often the only contact between the villages and the world outside.

But woven throughout the dialogue are pleas for national unity and warnings against the pro-Communist Pathet Lao.

Tale Has Moral

After telling a fable about a buffalo, a tiger and a dog, for example the Mohlam spells out its moral:

"From my story, you will be reminded of the Lao people who do not love their country and change their minds in order to work for the foreigners."

He is referring to the North Vietnamese who are said to guide the Pathlet Lao.

Ivan T. Klecka, the U.S.I.S. field operations officer who hires the Mohlam, limits their propaganda to a "soft sell."

"If you tried a harder line, more preaching, the people would get bored," Mr. Klecka said. "It would be like Spike Jones playing straight classical music. That is not what people come to hear."

The popularity of the Mohlam is indisputable. During one recent damp evening, a team went by jeep to a deserted clearing several miles from Vientiane.

Hooking up a portable generator supplied by U.S.I.S., they soon had lights, a microphone, and a movie projector working.

Film Draws Villagers

The film, with a Laotian soundtrack, showed Premier Vanna Phouma, United States Ambassador Leonard Unger and President Johnson each going about his ceremonial duties. As

it flickered on the screen, villagers carrying candles or flashlights came out of the brush in twos and threes.

By the time the Mohlam began to sing, more than 200 people had clustered around them. Half were children who stayed through the entire four to five hour performance.

As the members of the troupe warmed up for their rawest material, a continuous guttural chuckle arose from the Laotians seated on the ground. Especially good lines were greeted with the kind of whoops heard at a Tennessee barn dance.

In the hope that the Mohlam could help the Lao villagers understand life in the United States, one team was flown to America for a visit.

The group returned with amazing new tales. "The Americans," Mr. Mohlam reported, "get their water from snakes. Every house has the heads of snakes sticking from a basin and they spit the water out at people."